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ABSTRACT

The techniques used to teach the short story in high school are discussed. Basic components that should be emphasized, either alone or in combination, are plot, character, and theme. By such an emphasis, the central meaning of the story is elicited. Examples of short stories that illustrate plot, character, and theme are given. Emphasis should be given tc the text of the story, and the teacher should lead the students toward a more mature literary experience. (DB)

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TEACHING THE SHORT STORY

by Sister Alberta Rohrkemper

The twentieth century has seen the maturing of the short story as a literary genre of the first order, no longer regarded as a minor appendage to the body of longer

TE 002 514

prose fiction, but as an art form in its own right, well deserving the serious attention of students of literature. Most high-school students naturally enjoy the multiple delights of the short story, and though the complex experience of the story itself is the central source of their enjoyment, they can be made more fully aware of the complementary pleasure of discussing the story and of perceiving the beauty of the literary form. Too often, perhaps, the short story unit has been viewed as standard fare for the ninth-year curriculum, with little time given to this form in later courses where it is equally appropriate for more advanced students.

What does a story tell the reader? What questions does the reader ask of the story? One may be attracted to a story by what happens in it, by the progression of incidents leading to its various situations. Another reader may be drawn to a story because of the people in it, people who look and act in ways both similar to and different from his own. Still another reader approaches a story for what it says, for the values its author states or implies. All of these readers respond to the style of the story, to the manner in which the writer tells his narrative. Consciously or unconsciously, the reader is affected by such elements as point of view, exposition, structure, diction, imagery, arrangement of sentences. A short story cannot be plot alone, not character, theme, not style alone, but rather the fusion of these elements into an organic whole, a dynamic unity resulting in a single work of literary art. In studying the short story in high school, a suggested approach is to emphasize one or other of these basic components, plot, character, theme, in order to arrive at the central meaning of the story.

An example of a story in which the element of plot is strongly marked and which might profitably be read and discussed by high-school seniors, is "Babylon Revisited," by F. Scott Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald is a popular author with adolescents today, for they seem to have an empathy with the expatriates about whom the author writes so sensitively. The plot structure of the story is fairly simple; with the exception of one flashback, the narrative pattern is chronological. Charlie Wales, an American, returns to Paris where he has once lived, to visit and to regain custody of his nine-year-old daughter Honoria, now being brought up by her aunt and uncle. The exposition reveals that it is a year and a half since Charlie has left Paris and that he comes back to find his friends scattered, the Ritz bar where he goes to find them empty and still. He has not been to the United States in months, but has come from Prague where he is doing well financially, having recovered from his losses in the stock market crash. As the plot moves toward complication, tension grows between Charlie and his wife's sister, Marion Peters, whose attitude toward him is one of "unalterable mistrust." A flashback reveals that Marion has always considered his negligence responsible for his wife's death. Internal conflict increases as Charlie struggles to regain the legal guardianship of his daughter and to overcome his remorse over the dissipated years in Paris which had ended with "his child taken from his control, his wife escaped to a grave in Vermont."

The conflict between the two main characters progresses in a pattern of repetition. Marion, remembering Charlie's alcoholism and irresponsiblity of three years ago, refuses at first to give up the custody of her dead sister's child. Finally, half convinced that he has indeed made a fresh start in life, that he has given up drinking and is now able to care for the child who obviously loves him, she agrees to let Honoria go with her father to Prague. A foreshadowing note has been inserted, however, making the reader wonder if such a happy ending will be possible. Before the final interview with his sister-in-law, Charlie has run into two of his old friends, "sudden ghosts out of the past," Duncan Schaeffer and Lorraine Quarles, still idly flitting about Paris. It is an unwelcome encounter for him, although they are glad to meet him again. Seeing the formerly attractive Lorraine as "trite, blurred, worn away," he renews his sincere resolve to cut away from the past.

The climax comes when Marion and her husband are discussing with Charlie the arrangements for Honoria's leaving their home. There is a long peal at the door-bell and the maid ushers in two uninvited guests, Duncan Schaeffer and Lorraine Quarles. "They were gay, they were hilarious, they were roaring with laughter." Charlie, forced to speak to these rude, intoxicated people, is no less horrified than his sister-in-law who cannot believe now that he has really given up his former disreputable acquaintances. Marion, her small stock of confidence in Charlie utterly evaporated, refuses to let Honoria go. Charlie goes back to the Ritz bar, realizing that there is nothing he can do. He still wants his child. "He would come back some day."

The conclusion of the story has brought about a stabilizing of conflicts. Temporarily, at least, the struggles of Charlie Wales are resolved, unhappily for him. Through the medium of a carefully drawn plot structure in which the final meaning is implicit, Fitzgerald has told the story of one man's experience. But there is a deeper significance that will not escape the reader. For the story has enlarged the reader's sympathies. It has said something about human weakness and human strength, about honor and compassion. A man's choices are his judgments; no man can escape from the consequences of his actions. The story has said this without preaching, but implicity, within the artistic bounds of the narrative form. There is much else about "Babylon Revisited" that could also be studied: diction, dialogue, the symbolic title, and so on. The teacher, however, must beware of over-studying a story. Concentrating on the plot will show students how a good author uses it to reveal meaning.

In fiction as in life, character is closely related to the element of conflict. Most short stories deal with the common typical conflict of one human being with another. Popular fiction depicts the outcomes of stereotyped conflicts. The poor boy rather than his rich rival wins the beautiful heiress; the new cowhand saves Triple Z Ranch from the depredations of the wily Eastern land-grabbers. In stories of richer depth and insight, however, conflict between characters is more complex, more nearly like that between human beings, who often find in themselves a variegated web of good and bad motives and desires. It is the conflict waged within a character which is found in the most mature type of story. In any case, characters in a short story must make sense, their own kind of sense, not necessarily the reader's. The writer's artistic ability must convince the reader that such persons could really exist. The mad Miss Emily of Faulkner's appalling story may actually live in some creaking, magnolia-bordered mansion the reader once passed. A study of how a writer presents his characters, of what he does with them, will reveal the meaning of the story.

A story developed mainly through characterization, one which would be suitable for study with high-school seniors, is Katherine Mansfield's "Marriage a la Mode." Though it is about sophisticated adults living in London in the 'twenties, the story is one that is unhappily familiar today. Students may have read about it in the "Can This Marriage Be Saved?" column of LADIES HOME JOURNAL. On his way home from his law office William stops to buy fruit to take to his two young sons. Once on the train and settled in the first-class smoker, he tries to concentrate on some paper work he has brought along, but he is too distracted, as he is every Saturday afternoon, at the thought of Isabel waiting for him at their place in the country. He thinks of her beauty, her "exquisite freshness," as he remembers the happiness of their early years together in the "poky little house" in the city. That had been before they had gone to the studio party at Moira Morrison's, before his wife had somehow changed into the "new Isabel" who had cajoled him into buying the fashionable house far out from the city.

She is there to meet him and with her are her young poet and artist friends, Bill, Dennis, Moira, Bobby. After tea, while William stays behind, they all go off to the beach. Alone, he wanders through the

downstairs into the long, yellow sitting-room. Tired and hungry, he sits down to wait. Presently voices and laughter come in through the French windows and he hears Isabel say: "Oh no! Oh no! That's not fair to William. Be nice to him, my children! He's only staying until tomorrow evening." As he moves on to the terrace the group sees him. "Pity you didn't come, William," says Bobby Kane. "The water was divine. And we all went to a little pub afterwards and had sloe gin."

It is not until the next afternoon when he is leaving that William finds himself alone with his wife. "Poor William," she says, "going back to London!" They walk together out to the taxi, saying nothing, for William sees that there is "nothing to say now." On the train ride back to the city he begins to compose a letter to Isabel. Late on Monday she receives it. Thinking that a love letter from William will amuse her dilettante friends—still there after the long weekend—she begins to read it to them: "My darling, precious Isabel." She scarcely has begun when she is interrupted by their hysterical laughter. "God forbid, my darling, that I should be a drag on your happiness." To their surprise, Isabel has stopped laughing; she crushes the letter in her hand and rushes from the room. She will write William at once. The moment of truth has let her see herself "for what she was, shallow, tinkling, vain." She must make up her mind. What will she do? Of course she will stay here and write her husband. Then from the garden below she hears Moira and the others calling her to come down and go to the beach with them. No, it is too difficult. She will write him later —she will most certainly write. Laughing in the "new way," she runs down to the garden.

Isabel is described through her own words and actions and through the brittle, inane talk of her parasite friends who reveal her as a vain, foolish woman, utterly unworthy of her husband's devotion. "Titania," Moira Morrison has named her, because of her delicate beauty. Like the queen of the fairies, Isabel does indeed live in an enchanted world. Her final decision is entirely in character with what the reader has come to know of her essential shallowness. The denouement is expected, for the conflict between the two main characters could not have been realistically resolved by a "happy ending." Miss Mansfield gives a picture of how life sometimes is, a story of William and Isabel and the failure of their marriage. But through her characters she is making a larger statement about human experiences—about man's essential loneliness and the problem of understanding another human being.

The unique and compelling stories of Flannery O'Connor offer other rich examples of short fiction in which the element of character brings out basic meaning. "Revelation," a story which might be studied in a senior class, contains little plot structure. Not much external action occurs, but Mrs. Turpin, a small-town Southern woman, undergoes a drastic internal change. For the first time in her life she looks at herself and sees ugliness. Maybe she really is an "old wart hog" from hell, as the violently unbalanced Wellesley girl had called her as she attacked her that afternoon in the doctor's waiting-room. She had always been a good woman. She had been grateful that Jesus "had not made her a nigger or white trash, or ugly." That evening, standing beside her pig pen, she has a vision of a vast horde of souls "rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks shouting and leaping like frogs." Bringing up the rear of the procession are people like herself and Claud, good people, people who had always been known for "good order and common sense and respectable behavior." She will not be able to forget that "by their shocked and altered faces" she can tell that "even their virtues" are "being burned away." The story is about the smug, righteous Ruby Turpin from the Bible Belt, but it is more than this. Through her skillful characterization, Miss O'Connor holds up a mirror which reflects to the reader the hypocrisy and

meanness not of Mrs. Turpin, but of himself.

Students sometimes confuse theme with topic. Theme is what the writer makes of his topic—it is his comment on the topic. The total story is the embodiment of its theme, for a good story always reflects in some way the meaning of experience. The short works of J. D. Salinger are appropriate for studying the story from the angle of theme. Most seniors will have earlier read and reacted to the search for meaning in the odyssey of Holden Caulfield and in the philosophic probings for reality by Franny and Zooey Glass. Salinger's "For Esme, with Love and Squalor," is about a World War II soldier, Sergeant X, who is quartered in a house in Bavaria, having shortly before been released from a hospital, physically cured of his battle wounds, but psychologically unfit to take up life again. One day he picks up a book that had belonged to the Nazi girl who had until recently lived in the house. Inscribed on the fly leaf are the words: "Dear God, life is hell." Something in him makes him write below the inscription a quotation from Dostoevski: "Fathers and teachers, I ponder 'What is hell?' I maintain that it is the suffering of being unable to love." He is amazed at the sudden insight into the cause of his own anguish, but is powerless to heal it. Unexpectedly he is saved by the love of Esme, the thirteen-year-old English girl whom he had only briefly talked with in England before being sent to the front. The girl's father had been killed in the war and she is proudly wearing his wrist watch, its man's size much too big for her. She has not forgotten Sergeant X, but has sent him her father's watch "as a talisman." For the first time in months the soldier feels he will be able to sleep again. He has been redeemed by love.

Theme in this story is almost explicitly stated by the author: "Without love, life is meaningless and impossible." It is a common theme with Salinger, for almost all of his stories deal with the search for love. For some of his characters, as for Seymour in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," the search ends in failure and suicide. In "Teddy," a ten-year-old child prodigy is a genuine mystic, possessing an oriental religious vision. Teddy tells Bob Nicholson, the young man interviewing him, of his first mystical experience at the age of six:

> I saw that everything was God, and my hair stood up, and all that. . . . It was on a Sunday, I remember. My sister was only a tiny child then, and she was drinking her milk, and all of a sudden I saw that *she* was God and the *milk* was God. I mean all she was doing was pouring God into God, if you know what I mean.

The story ends with Teddy's accidental death, just as he has foreseen it and which he has regarded, not with Western logic as the end of his life, but with Eastern intuition as final fulfillment and reunion with life, as return to the source of love. In this story Salinger's favorite theme is distilled into an essence.

There is a rich diversity of ways of studying the short story. The teacher will not attempt to teach everything that can be taught about imaginative fiction with reference to a particular story. Emphasis will always be placed on the text of the story. Close reading of the text will lead toward illumination of a particular literary experience and its relationship to all human experience, rather than to a sterile analysis of external characteristics. The good teacher will try to lead students toward the enjoyment of more mature literary experience. In moving beyond the narrative level of a story, from the concrete to the abstract, they will learn to catch echoes of meaning they have not heard before. Teaching the short story in this way can help to foster in students a true understanding and appreciation of literature as an art form, an imitation of that which is typical in the real world.

Editor's Note: Sister Alberta has taught English at the secondary level for twenty-five years. She presently teachers seniors at Julienne High School in Dayton.